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ABSTRACT

In order to discover how the inclusion of background material affects students' perceptions of a play, students in an oral communications class at Kansas State University responded to excerpts from three kinds of plays: "The Prisoner of Second Avenue" by Neil Simon (comedy), "Long Day's Journey into Night" by Eugene O'Neill (tragedy), and "Angel Street" by Patrick Hamilton (melodrama). In the first session, students rated the importance, or weight, of 114 semantic-differential-type adjectives to symbolic messages in general; in the second session, students used these terms to rate excerpts from plays, which were distributed randomly; and in the third session, students rerated the same dramatic excerpt after reading background material relevant to that play (identity of the playwright, basic information about the playwright's other works and honors, and a capsule plot summary). Results showed that the addition of the type of background material introduced in this study contributes to increased appreciation of dramatic forms. (Tables of findings are included.) (JM)

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The Effect of Background Material on Students' Perceptions of Drama

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CS 501 640

THE EFFECT OF BACKGROUND MATERIAL ON STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF DRAMA

A standard ingredient in dramatic literature courses is background information about the plays and playwrights under study. Teachers assume that students not only should know the literature, but also should have brief biographical data about the playwrights as well as information about the circumstances in which the plays were first produced. In courses in which plays are studied as vehicles for acting, directing, or design, however, background material is frequently omitted. Teachers of these latter courses apparently assume that emphasis placed upon background may confuse the student. These diverse approaches suggest an interesting question: how does the inclusion of background material affect students' perceptions of the play? The present study was undertaken to answer this question.

Stimulus Materials and Response Instrument

The stimulus materials selected were the plays The Prisoner of Second Avenue by Neil Simon, Long Day's Journey into Night by Eugene O'Neill, and Patrick Hamilton's Angel Street. These plays, all written after 1930 in English prose and all considered realistic in style, were chosen as examples of the dramatic genres comedy, tragedy, and melodrama respectively. The reason for selecting an example of each genre was to control in part for possible differences that might affect student responses.

The response instrument provided the subjects with a broad spectrum of response indicators from which they were free to select those applicable to the drama being judged. To develop the instrument nearly five hundred semantic differential type adjectives (e.g. colorful) thought to apply to messages in general were selected.[1] By a series of factor analyses of ratings of general

term applicability to messages, the list was reduced to 114 satisfactory items.[2] These adjectives represented 31 positive and 29 negative factors with one to four scales measuring each. The test-retest reliability of the final instrument was .88. In instrument application, subjects were asked to provide two ratings for each term: The first was in answer to the question, "How important do you feel that (colorfulness) is to any message?" For the second, the subject rated the particular message: "How (colorful) is this particular play?" The scale score, or effective judgmental value of the term (colorful), was simply the geometric mean of these two ratings. In order to avoid the assumption of bipolarity of the ordinary semantic differential, positive and negative terms were applied separately. To provide maximum sensitivity and to avoid scale end effects, a ten-point scale was provided. A computer program was developed to consolidate term values and to determine the average of all terms measuring the same factor.

Method and Procedure

Sections of about 250 words in length from each of three dramas were arbitrarily chosen as the stimulus objects. Selection criteria included unity, coherence, and representativeness of the excerpt for the drama as a whole. Equal numbers of these sections in mimeographed form were randomly ordered for distribution to the subjects. Also a page of background material about each play and its author was prepared. The background information was intended to communicate three things: the identity of the playwright, basic information about the playwright's other works and honors received (if any), and a capsule summary of the plot. The information prepared for Angel Street was as follows:

The excerpt on the following page is from Patrick Hamilton's melodrama, Angel Street. Although Hamilton wrote a number of plays

and novels (most which were melodramatic thrillers), he is remembered solely for Angel Street. The play was successfully produced in both London and New York and was made into a movie starring Ingrid Bergman and Charles Boyer. The Broadway production of Angel Street ran for 1295 performances, one of the ten longest-running nonmusical plays in Broadway history.

Angel Streets' Broadway cast included Vincent Price and Leo G. Carroll, who helped tell the story of Mr. Manningham. Set in London during the 1880's, the play portrays Manningham's attempt to drive his wife insane while he searches for a fortune in jewels. In this excerpt Detective Rough reveals to Mrs. Manningham what her husband is trying to do.

It might be argued that this background material increased the credibility of the message and that any effect would be the result of increased credibility rather than the background material itself. However, the background material used here is of the same nature as that generally used in dramatic literature courses. Therefore, we believe that it provides a reasonable test of the effect of typical background material on students' perceptions of drama.

Subjects for this study were students in Oral Communications I classes at Kansas State University. The data were collected during three separate class periods. During the first session subjects rated the importance or weight of each of the 114 terms to symbolic messages in general. At the second session, using the same terms, each subject rated the excerpt from the dramatic genre he had randomly received. The third session was for rerating the same dramatic excerpt, but this time subsequent to reading the background material. The blind used for requesting the third rating was that the background page had been in-

advertently omitted at the preceding session. Twenty-two subjects rated the comedy, 13 the melodrama, and 21 the tragedy. The difference in numbers of subjects in the three groups was due to absences.

The basic data, then, consisted of three sets of 114 ratings each: The first, a set of subjective weight or importance ratings for the various message qualities; the second, estimates of how much of these qualities the dramatic excerpt possessed; and the third, estimates of how much was possessed by the dramatic excerpt as modified by pertinent introductory, summary, and background material.

Statistical Analyses

The dependent variables were the six sets of 60 factor scores derived from the raw scores. There were two such sets for each dramatic passage. An overall *t*-test showed significant differences ($p < .05$) between each dramatic form and its with-background counterpart. This finding confirms the assumption of drama teachers that the inclusion of background information can affect the general perception of the drama. The important question, and the one that the present study attempts to answer, is what changes in perception account for the difference? To determine significant factor differences, correlated *t*-tests were run between scores for each dramatic passage with and without its background materials.[3]

Results

The addition of background information to the tragedy resulted in 12 statistically significant improvements in student perceptions along the factors provided. Table 1 shows that the play became more colorful, clever, skillful, imaginative, and theatrical. It also became less unpersuasive,[4] less unschol-

arly, less amateurish, less dull, less unimaginative, less unskillful, and less run-of-the-mill.

For the melodrama, as shown in Table 2, the addition of background information resulted in 13 statistically significant changes in perceptions. For the positive indexes it was viewed as more efficient, persuasive, decisive, responsible, self-confident, and scholarly. From the negative viewpoint it became less unpersuasive, less indecisive, less impractical, less unclear, less ignorant, less amateurish, and less worthless.

Table 3 shows that the comedy in modified form brought about 21 statistically significant changes in reader perceptions. With background support it was viewed as more likable, colorful, persuasive, decisive, broad-minded, self-confident, scholarly, clever, skillful, and theatrical. It was also perceived as less irresponsible, less disordered, less impractical, less unclear, less unknowledgable, less ignorant, less untrained, less uncooperative, less cowardly, less amateurish, and less unskillful.

In sum, the three tables show a total of 46 significant changes out of a possible 180. It also is instructive to note direction of change; all 46 changes were improvements,[5] that is, the play was perceived in a more positive light. When non-significant changes are included, there were 47 out of the 60 for tragedy, 53 for the melodrama, and 57 for the comedy which changed in the direction of improvement.

Discussion

The changes that occurred as a consequence of adding background information to these particular segments of plays suggest a general salutary effect across dramatic forms. The most important finding is that <u>every single statis-</u>

tically significant reevaluation represents an improvement. The conclusion appears unequivocal that the addition of the type of background material introduced here contributes to an increased appreciation of dramatic forms.

It is also interesting to note the general absence of overlapping trait changes among forms. Only 5 of 29 were common between the tragedy and comedy, 2 of 29 between the tragedy and melodrama, and 6 of 34 between the melodrama and the comedy. This means that only about 14% of the changes were common among the three forms, or, conversely, 86% were unique. Whether this finding reflects a real difference among dramatic genres or is specific to the three excerpts used in this study can not be answered from the present data.

This exploratory study raises a number of additional questions for future investigation: (1) The subjects used here were not serious students of drama, nor were they accustomed to reading plays frequently. Would the addition of background material have a similar effect on more sophisticated subjects? (2) Would the same effect be obtained if subjects read an entire play rather than a selected excerpt? (3) This study used dramas written in a realistic style. Would similar effects occur for other styles of drama? (4) Does the addition of background material affect other dependent variables (retention, for example)? (5) Many directors in educational theatre supply audiences with background information by providing program notes. Do such notes enhance appreciation of live performances?

These and similar questions appear worthy of study and seem tractable with the research design and measuring instrument used here. The implication of the present study is clear, however. If the dramatic educator wishes to enhance a student's appreciation of a play, he should supply him with background information concerning the play and the playwright.

Table 1

Without and With Background Factor Comparisons

For Tragedy (N=21)

Factor	$\bar{X}$ without	$\bar{X}$ with	t	P
		Positive		
Colorful	4.66	5.89	3.67	.01
Clever	4.72	5.84	2.86	.01
Skillful	4.21	4.98	2.99	.01
Imaginative	3.46	5.02	3.14	.01
Theatrical	2.97	4.30	3.27	.01
		Negative		
Unpersuasive	5.14	4.13	3.62	.01
Unscholarly	3.92	2.98	2.52	.02
Amateurish	4.91	4.25	2.13	.05
Dull	5.40	3.09	3.79	.01
Unimaginative	4.06	3.30	2.32	.05
Unskillful	4.66	3.90	2.94	.01
Run-of-the-mill	5.22	4.00	2.75	.02

Note. Range = 0 - 9.

Table 2

Without and With Background Factor Comparisons

For Melodrama (N = 13)

Factor	$\bar{X}$ without	$\bar{X}$ with	t	p
		Positive		
Efficient	4.28	5.23	2.21	.05
Persuasive	5.66	7.18	2.24	.05
Decisive	4.79	5.60	2.74	.02
Responsible	3.31	4.64	3.25	.01
Self-confident	5.37	5.84	2.56	.02
Scholarly	3.56	4.49	2.42	.05
		Negative		
Unpersuasive	3.97	3.00	2.43	.05
Indecisive	3.40	2.57	2.23	.05
Impractical	5.27	3.90	5.29	.01
Unclear	4.52	3.18	3.16	.01
Ignorant	4.44	3.00	2.82	.02
Amateurish	4.31	2.91	3.32	.01
Worthless	5.14	3.20	3.16	.01

Note. Range = 0 - 9.

Table 3

Without and With Background Factor Comparisons

For Comedy (N = 22)

Factor	$\bar{X}$ without	$\bar{X}$ with	t	p
		Positive		
Likable	3.33	4.22	2.09	.05
Colorful	4,13	4.89	2.87	.01
Persuasive	4.72	5.92	2.44	.05
Decisive	3.63	4.66	2.15	.05
Broad-minded	2.89	4.23	2.41	.05
Self-confident	4.19	5.12	2.16	.05
Scholarly	2.43	3.63	3.25	.01
Clever	2.84	4.13	2.89	.01
Skillful	3.96	4.97	4.14	.01
Theatrical	2.36	3.38	2.48	.05
		Negative		
Irresponsible	4.96	3.73	2.38	.05
Disordered	5.23	4.00	2.94	.01
Impractical	5.19	4.00	3.18	.01
Unclear	4.58	3.51	2.09	.05
Unknowledgable	5.27	4.30	2.33	.05
Ignorant	5.01	3.96	2.36	.05
Untrained	4.52	3.94	2.59	.02
Uncooperative	4.46	3.31	2.65	.02
Cowardly	4.01	3.16	2.58	.02
Amateurish	4.92	3.95	2.09	.05
Unskillful	5.28	3.89	2.47	.05

Note. Range = 0 - 9.

Notes

1. These terms were selected from results of the factor analyses of Osgood (1957), from Anderson's (1968) word list, and from textbooks in communication.

2. To check factor stability, various factor analytic programs were used including U. of Calif. BMD 03M (orthogonal rotation), BMD X72 (oblique rotation), and U. of Miami MFACTOR. The total number of subjects was approximately 800. The number of factors rotated was determined by an eigenvalue of .8. Minimum loadings of .60 combined with maximum contamination loadings of .30 determined scale selection.

3. The program used was PRDOBS, The Wrubel Computing Center, Indiana University.

4. Our approach to instrument development involved the separation, both for the factor analyses and for application, of positive and negative scale terms rather than the more usual bipolar adjectival format. This was done to avoid the assumption of semantic to orthographic isomorphism. Some subjects, for example, viewed "incompetent" as the negative pole of the "wise" dimension. For such subjects the standard bipolar form is incorrect. The unipolar form, however, results in a certain awkwardness in describing results; one is forced to state that one form of the message is "less incompetent" than the other.

5. Because each scale range is 0 - 9, a mean increase for positive ratings denotes an improvement in response, while a mean decrease in negative scale ratings likewise denotes an improvement.

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